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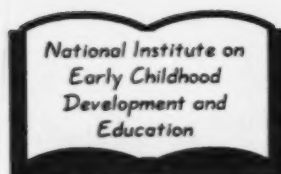
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ABSTRACT

Many parents do not know how to become involved in their children's education, and many teachers do not receive enough training in working with families. This quarterly early childhood digest discusses ways families and schools can work together to help young children learn and grow. The digest begins by describing how a teacher's home visit helped her learn about the talents of one student's father, which became a bridge to his involvement with the school. The digest then discusses what families can do to work better with schools, including meeting with the teacher or caregiver, clarifying expectations, sharing perceptions of the child's interests and challenges, and sharing their time and talents. The remainder of the digest discusses how teachers and families can work together, including parents letting teachers know about the family, parents being encouraged by school personnel to get involved, and school personnel learning how to respect and value different cultures. (HTH)

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Early Childhood Digest:

Families and Teachers as Partners

March 1998

The Early Childhood Digest is a quarterly report on ways that families and schools can work together to help young children learn and grow. The information for this Digest is based on research conducted by the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP), which studies programs and policies in education and child care that support families.

An audience filled with parents broke into applause as the kindergarten class finished its play "The Little Red Hen." Parents came up to the teacher, Claudia Gomez, in tears, telling her how moved they were by the children's performances. Don Barnes, an African-American father of a kindergarten student, wrote the music for the play.*

Don was not always so involved in the school. At first, he wasn't very involved at all. But when Claudia, his child's teacher, visited his home, she discovered that Don had many talents: he was a gardener, singer, writer, and composer.

Each time she visited the family, Claudia learned new things about them. After a few visits from Claudia, Don began to feel more comfortable and agreed to plant a garden for the children. As time went on, he started doing more things with the students. First he sang with them in the classroom and then he wrote the musical.

Everyone was excited about the play. Claudia called other parents to help arrange the choreography and sew costumes. The play was a big success. But more importantly, the children, the teachers, and the families all learned from working together and everyone had fun while they learned.

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Children, families, and schools all benefit when families and teachers work together. However, many families do not know how to work with teachers, and while teachers need to know how to work with all families, most do not get enough training. It is not surprising then that many teachers and families don't know how to reach out to each other. Some teachers do not know how to talk with families or how to invite them to help in the classroom. Likewise, many families feel ill at ease with teachers or are afraid to talk to them or to enter the classroom.

What can families do to work better with schools?

All parents and family members want to help their young children succeed in school. By working together with schools and teachers, families can help their young children succeed. Below are some questions that family members can ask themselves to begin to meet teachers halfway:

- *What is my relationship like with my young child's teacher or caregiver?* To strengthen your relationship with your child's teacher, call to plan a meeting or to set a time to talk on the phone. Be sure to share what you expect your child to learn. Ask about your child's schoolwork and behavior in preschool or school.
- *How do I find out what the school expects from me and share what I want for my child from the school?* Families and teachers often come from different cultural backgrounds, which can make it hard to know what to expect from each other. Let your child's teacher know what you do at home to help your child learn and what you want your child to learn in school. Also ask what the teacher expects you to do in the school or with your child.

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- *How can I help my young child at home?* You can ask your child's teacher for suggestions about learning activities that you and your child can do together at home.
- *What can I tell my young child's teacher about my child?* You are an expert about your child. Think about your child's interests, talents, and challenges. Share this information with your child's teacher so that the teacher can help your child learn.
- *How can I be most helpful to the school or early childhood program?* Let your child's teacher know what your interests and skills are, such as sewing, cooking, woodworking, or computers. Also let the teacher know when and where you are available to help. Ask about the kinds of help that are most needed.
- *How can I help educate teachers?* Think about how you can help teachers learn to work as partners and become better teachers. For example, you could form a committee to help new teachers learn about your community. You could also help change school policies and practices by joining the Parent Teacher Association.

How can teachers and families work together?

To work well with families and help young children learn, teachers need to know several things. The following skills are ones that parents can look for in their child's teacher. These are also skills that parents can help teachers learn.

Teachers need to know:

- About families—who they are and what they want for their young child.
- How to involve families in their young child's learning.
- How to talk with families.
- How to support families in helping their young child learn at home.
- How to involve families in the classroom and school.
- How to support families' interests and needs.
- How to share decision making with families.
- Respect and value different cultures.

Research on how teachers learn to work with families shows good examples of families and teachers as partners and the important role that families play. For example, in an early childhood center in Napa, California where the preschool teachers are mostly non-Hispanic and the families are mostly Hispanic, the teachers invited the families to the center to learn from them about their culture and their goals for their young children. In this way, the parents and teachers helped each other gain important knowledge about what the families and teachers valued, how to communicate with each other, and how to work as partners.

In an early childhood center in Fort Worth, Texas, teachers and other staff members have helped busy parents save time and have more time to spend with their young children. Parents can drop off their dry cleaning at the center when they bring their children there in the morning. They can also buy snacks for the ride home when picking their children up in the evenings. Many of these time-saving ideas came from parents who returned a survey about what they needed help with most from the child care center.

This Digest was prepared by Holly Kreider of the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP). A recent report published by the U.S. Department of Education and the Harvard Family Research Project, called *New Skills for New Schools: Preparing Teachers in Family Involvement*, looks at what teachers need to know to be partners with families. To order a copy of the report call 1-800-USA-LEARN. For more information on HFRP reports call 617-496-4304 or write to them at 38 Concord Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138.

This Digest was sponsored by the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. It may be reproduced at no cost. For copies contact Carol Sue Fromboluti at (202) 219-1672.

*This story is based on fact but names have been changed.